Nixon 'Junket' Comment Irks Peace Corps

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junket, *n* . . .(1) a tour or journey usually undertaken for pleasure (2) a trip made by an official at public expense.

—Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

The Peace Corps was up in arms yesterday over President Nixon's characterization of service in the volunteer agency as a "junket."

Peace Corps director Dan Hess, who said he regretted the statement but did not believe that President Nixon meant to impugn the Peace Corps, requested a "clarification" from the White House. Sargent Shriver, the first Peace Corps director, called the remark "an insensitive insult." And various former volunteers phoned the Peace Corps office in New York to denounce the President.

Mr. Nixon Wednesday brought up the Peace Corps at a White House press conference while giving his views opposing amnesty for draft evaders and deserters.

"Those who served paid their price," the President said. "Those who deserted must pay their price. And that price is not a junket in the Peace Corps or something like that as some have suggested. The price is a criminal penalty for disobeying the laws of the United States."

The statement dismayed Peace Corps officials, who have been waging a persistent and largely successful battle to increase Peace Corps recruitments in the face of an increased emphasis on skilled volunteers and what Hess in a December interview called "a sweep of neo-isolationism."

The President's remark coincided with a campaign launched last Friday on the theme of "Now that there's peace, what about the Peace Corps?" As part of this campaign, the new Action agency, of which Peace Corps is now a part, last Friday mailed a 30-second television commercial to 260 TV stations and sent four radio spots to 400 commercial radio stations and 450 campus stations.

The campaign also includes an advertisement in 61 national magazines and widespread distribution of two posters, "Go in Peace, Join the Peace Corps" and "Peace Let It Shine."

Several high-ranking officials in the agency said the President's comment undercut the campaign, and one called the remark "appalling."

"On Monday the President sent to the hill a really good budget for Peace Corps," another official said. "On Wednesday he stabbed us in the back."

Officially, the Peace Corps view as presented by Hess was that the $77 million requested for Peace Corps in the 1974 budget was a far more important expression of the President's position than a chance remark at a press conference.

But some former volunteers, particularly those from the Shriver era, didn't see it that way.

"It's probably the first honest statement Nixon's made yet about what he feels about the Peace Corps," said Donovan McClure, a former Peace Corps director in Turkey and West Africa. "He still sees it as a Kennedy program and resents the involvement of the young people who run it."

Some of the strongest criticism came from Mr. Nixon's 1968 presidential opponent, Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey (D-Minn.).

"I wonder if the President really knows what goes on in the Peace Corps," Humphrey said in a televised interview. "The Peace Corps is hard work. The Peace Corps is men and women, young and old, going to parts of the world that very few people want to go to, to help people to lift themselves out of poverty and disease and ignorance. Mr. President, you ought not talk about the Peace Corps as if's a junket."

Shriver, the Democratic candidate for Vice President in 1972, said the President's remark was "an insult to all the thousands of young people who have served in the Peace Corps since 1963 and who are still serving under his alleged leadership."

The Peace Corps has already served as an alternative for many young Americans who didn't want to fight in Vietnam. Various draft boards allowed conscientious objectors to serve in the Peace Corps, and Hess noted that some had worked under him when he was country director in Korea.

Until 1970, Peace Corps volunteers were allowed to postpone military service by joining the corps, and some escaped it altogether if they were 26 when their Peace Corps enlistment ended.

Recruiting officials in the Action agency have pointed out in the past that the ending of the draft has made it more difficult to recruit both for Peace Corps and Vista. They think the draft encouraged enlistment in these agencies even after draft deferments were ended.

Hess said he thought that the President had a high regard for the Peace Corps and that he didn't want the corps to be a haven for lawbreakers.

Hess nonetheless requested a clarification, but said he had not received a reply.

The issue was not raised at yesterday's White House press briefing, and Presidential Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler did not volunteer a statement.